Qualitative Case Studies

The term "case study" is often used interchangeably with "qualitative research," especially when researchers new to qualitative research feel pressure to label their inquiry as something more than just "a qualitative study." However, as with the other types of qualitative research already discussed (phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative inquiry), a *qualitative case study* has some defining characteristics that are in addition to what it shares with other forms of qualitative research. Part of the confusion lies in the fact that some case studies employ both qualitative and quantitative methods (see the "mixed methods" discussion in Chapter Three). However, in this chapter on "Types of Qualitative Research" we will limit our discussion to case studies that are exclusively *qualitative* in design. Thus qualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive.

Modern case study research has antecedents in anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Further, lawyers, doctors, social workers, and even detectives can be involved in researching a "case." But it wasn't until the evolution of qualitative research methods that case studies received attention from a methodological perspective. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, textbooks on research methods were all about variations of experimental designs and statistical methods. Some of these texts included a final catch-all chapter titled "Case Studies" wherein it was acknowledged that there existed the occasional historical or in-depth descriptive study of a phenomenon. By the 1980s, Stake (1988), Yin (1984), Merriam (1988), and others were writing about case study research as a methodology.

A *case study* is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system. Part of the confusion surrounding case studies is that the process of conducting a case study is conflated with both the unit of study (the case) and the product of this type of investigation. Yin (2014), for example, defines case study in terms of the research process. "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context

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may not be clearly evident" (p. 16). As Yin (2014) observes, case study is a design particularly suited to situations in which it is impossible to separate the phenomenon's variables from their context. Stake (2005), however, focuses on trying to pinpoint the unit of study—the case. Wolcott (1992) sees it as "an end-product of field-oriented research" (p. 36) rather than a strategy or method.

Of course each of these approaches reveals something about case studies and contributes to a general understanding of the nature of this kind of research. We have concluded, however, that the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study: the case. As Stake suggests, "much qualitative research aims at understanding one thing well: one playground, one band, one Weight Watchers group" (2010, p. 27). Further, case study is less of a methodological choice than "a choice of what is to be studied" (Stake, 2005, p. 443). The "what" is a *bounded system* (Smith, 1978), a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries. You can "fence in" what you are going to study. The case, then, could be a single person who is a case example of some phenomenon, a program, a group, an institution, a community, or a specific policy. Some examples include Sprow Forté's (2013) case study of a financial literacy program aimed at Latina mothers, Coady's (2013) study of the adult health learning of participants in a particular community-based cardiac rehabilitation program in Nova Scotia, and Perry's (2008) case study of the national health policy of Ghana. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) think of the case as "a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context" (p. 28). They graphically present it as a circle with a heart in the center. The heart is the focus of the study, and the circle "defines the edge of the case: what will not be studied" (p. 28).

The unit of analysis, *not* the topic of investigation, characterizes a case study. For example, a study of how older adults learn to use computers would probably be a qualitative study but not a case study because the unit of analysis would be the learners' experiences, and an indefinite number of older adult learners and their experiences using computers could be selected for the study. For it to be a case study, *one* particular program or *one* particular

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classroom of learners (a bounded system), or *one* particular older learner selected on the basis of typicality, uniqueness, success, and so forth, would be the unit of analysis. Stake (2006, p. 1) explains:

> A case is a noun, a thing, an entity; it is seldom a verb, a participle, a functioning. Schools may be our cases—real things that are easy to visualize. . . . Training modules may be our cases—amorphous and abstract, but still things, whereas "training" is not. Nurses may be our cases; we usually do not define "nursing activity" as the case. "Managing," "becoming effective," "giving birth," and "voting" are examples of functioning, not entities we are likely to identify as cases. For our cases, we may select "managers," "production sites," "labor and delivery rooms," or "training sessions for voters." With these cases we find opportunities to examine functioning, but the functioning is not the case.

If the phenomenon you are interested in studying is not intrinsically bounded, it is not a case. One technique for assessing the boundedness of the topic is to ask how finite the data collection would be; that is, whether there is a limit to the number of people involved who could be interviewed or a finite time for observations. If there is no end, actually or theoretically, to the number of people who could be interviewed or to observations that could be conducted, then the phenomenon is not bounded enough to qualify as a case.

Since it is the *unit of analysis* that determines whether a study is a case study, this type of qualitative research stands apart from the other types described in this chapter. The other types of qualitative research—such as ethnography, phenomenology, narrative, and so on—are defined by the focus of the study, not the unit of analysis. And in fact, since it is the unit of analysis—a bounded system—that defines the case, other types of studies can be combined with the case study. Ethnographic case studies are quite common, for example, wherein the culture of a particular social group is studied in depth. In addition, one could build grounded theory within a case study, or present a person's "story," hence combining narrative with case study.

Although our definition of a qualitative case study as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" is congruent

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with other definitions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2011; Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015; Stake, 2005), some readers may find Creswell's detailed definition helpful. For him, "case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a *case*) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving *multiple sources of information* (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case *description* and case-based themes" (2013, p. 97; emphasis in original).

Finally, case studies can be historical, as in the history of an organization or program; biographical, wherein "the researcher conducts extensive interviews with one person for the purpose of collecting a first-person narrative" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2011, p. 63); or comparative. Comparative case studies, also called multicase or multisite case studies, involve collecting and analyzing data from several cases and can be distinguished from the single case study that may have subunits or subcases embedded within (such as students within a school). Taylor (2006), for example, wished to explore learning in nonformal community sites. He looked at state parks as one case and home improvement centers as a second case, comparing what the two had in common in terms of planning and instruction of the educational activity. Another example of a comparative case study is Collins's (2001) and Collins and Hansen's (2011) well-known study of what distinguished companies that sustained top performance over fifteen years from mediocre-performing companies. Eleven companies that went from good to great that met rigorous selection criteria were studied in comparison with average-performing companies. As Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) point out, the more cases included in a study, and the greater the variation across the cases, the more compelling an interpretation is likely to be. "By looking at a range of similar and contrasting cases, we can understand a single-case finding, grounding it by specifying how and where and, if possible, why it carries on as it does. We can strengthen the precision, the validity, and the stability of the findings" (p. 33). The inclusion of multiple cases is, in fact, a common strategy for enhancing the external validity or generalizability of your findings (see Chapter Nine).

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